

Grandpa's Basement

by [Fred McGavran](#) (February 2025)



The Cemetery Entrance (Caspar David Friedrich, 1825)

“Do you remember Grandma’s basement, Wally?” my brother Jerry said to divert me and our older sister Dottie from the poor attendance at Aunt Lou’s visitation in the funeral home parlor.

Time passes very slowly waiting for friends of the decedent, when she had outlived them all. The only person we expected was Harris Scintilton, her lawyer, with news of Aunt Lou’s will almost sure to disappoint Jerry and myself. Then we could escape that claustrophobic conservatory of wilting flowers and leave our dear Aunt for one last night in a refrigerated vault before dropping her off at the family mausoleum. Jerry’s enthusiasm, like his once-sharp features, had softened with the years until he was nearly as anxious for a drink as to learn which of us our Aunt had favored.

“Didn’t Grandpa keep his beer in the basement?” I asked.

“He bought all the German beer at S. S. Pierce in Boston when the Second World War started so his supply wouldn’t run out,” Dottie said. “But he didn’t live to finish it.”

Dottie had lived in the old house and listened to Aunt Lou while away the years with vicious stories about long-dead family members and alienated acquaintances. Relief only came when Anna, Grandma and then Aunt Lou’s long-suffering maid, appeared precisely at five with a bottle of gin, a bucket of ice, and two glasses. This regimen, supplemented by regular trips to a determined hair stylist and massive applications of Botox and facial cream, kept Aunt Lou and Dottie looking remarkably smooth and frozen, like masks removed from an old box once a year to wear on Halloween.

“He kept it in the old coal cellar at the back of the basement,” Jerry said. “Grandma had a washing machine with a ringer on top. In the winter, Anna hung up the washing down there to dry.”

For a second I saw Anna, fresh out of jail and so desperate

for somewhere to live that she worked for next to nothing, struggling to get a sheet started through the wringer without pulling her fingers and arm in after it. In summer she staggered up the stairs with baskets of damp laundry to hang out in the back garden so it would not mar our grandparents' view from the veranda. We had to stay with Grandma and Grandpa and Aunt Lou while Dad was in the Army during the Vietnam War.

Unlike the other mansions on the street, Grandpa's was built like a gigantic L with the horizontal bar facing the street and the vertical bar framing a large terraced garden that seemed to stretch beyond the iron gate at the back into some mysterious green meadow. The living and dining rooms had heavy Tudor beams and paneling that compressed us into silence. Because the main living areas faced the garden, the windows toward the street were small, and I half-expected to see someone pointing a wheel lock musket out of one of them to frighten away solicitors and children.

"Do you remember Grandpa?" Jerry asked me.

"I can't even remember what he looked like," I replied.

"He let us stand up in the car."

"I remember that!" Dottie cried, clapping her hands so that the bangles on Aunt Lou's favorite charm bracelet jingled like little bells dangling from her skeletal wrist.

"And he let us pee in the garden pool," Jerry continued.

"Just you boys," Dottie corrected him.

Maybe that's where Jerry and my rivalry with Dottie for our Grandparents' affection began: Jerry and I chose Grandpa and Dottie chose Grandma. I saw again the blue porcelain pool below the veranda with a green ceramic frog spouting water. Jerry was four, I was nearly three, and Dottie lorded it over us at seven.

"You and Jerry were trying to hit the frog," Dottie said accusingly. "I thought Grandma and Aunt Lou were going to kill him."

"'It's my damn house and my damn pool, so they can piss wherever they please!'" Jerry mimicked him.

I laughed so hard my sides ached.

"They made Anna drain the pool and wash the sides with bleach," Dottie said. "But he kept right on letting you two do it just to hear them scream."

"He was the only one who could ever shout down Grandma and Aunt Lou," I agreed.

"Were you ever in the basement, Dottie?" Jerry asked, suddenly serious.

The basement brought back a memory to me of something dark, like a half-forgotten dream that keeps returning until you awake sweaty with horror.

"You boys had all the fun," she snapped, repeating the line that she felt justified everything she had done to alienate us from Grandma and Aunt Lou. Waiting for the lawyer with the will, Jerry and I would soon learn who had won.

"Wally and I played hide and seek down there," Jerry went on. "One time when Anna came for Grandpa's beer, we sneaked after her into the coal cellar. There were cases of beer stacked up to the ceiling. Wally and I hid behind them and wouldn't come out until she found us."

"Did you get in trouble?" Dottie asked hopefully.

"Grandma and Aunt Lou got poor old Tom to move the beer out of the coal cellar into the basement. I never went in there again," Jerry said.

"Poor old Tom," Dottie repeated frowning. "That moron who came around looking for handouts?"

"He had long hair and a beard, and he smelled bad," I remembered, seeing again the blank-faced old man who could only utter single syllables.

"Grandma used him for odd jobs," Jerry said. "I can still see him in those baggy trousers and old coat."

"Aunt Lou pretended to flirt with him!" exclaimed Dottie, laughing. "Do you remember the time she dressed him up in Grandpa's clothes and made him put on an old pair of Grandpa's glasses and pretended she was taking him to the country club?"

"That's right!" Jerry exclaimed. "Grandma made him sit in the back of the Chrysler Imperial with the windows open because of the smell. Where do you think they were taking him?"

"When was that, Dottie?" I wondered.

"I can't remember," she said, but something about the way she looked down and her voice rose told me she did.

"Grandpa's first name was Thomas," I reflected, trying to picture Tom in one of Grandpa's finely tailored suits going out for a drive with Grandma and Aunt Lou.

"Grandpa would never let anyone call him Tom," Jerry said. "He said it was something you called blacks and factory workers and half-wits like old Tom."

Slowly my dream was returning.

"Jerry," I began. "Do you remember the time we lit newspapers in the pilot light on the hot water heater and ran around the basement?"

"Yes!" he cried, looking at me as if I had suddenly unlocked his happiest memory. "Anna caught us, didn't she?"

"She caught you," I said.

"What about you?" Dottie asked me.

"I hid in the coal cellar."

I was all alone in the dark with the newspaper burning down to my fingers, and I was so afraid.

"Ow!" I cried and dropped the newspaper in a burst of orange sparks.

Then I yanked on the door handle. It was locked.

"Well?" Dottie demanded.

"I banged on the door until Anna came."

"I hope you both got spanked," Dottie said.

"Not that time. Anna made us promise not to tell anyone because she'd lose her job if Grandma found out."

"I don't think we ever told anyone," Jerry said. "They put a lock on the basement door, and only Grandma and Anna had the key."

"Wasn't that about the time they sent Grandpa to the sanitarium?" Jerry asked. "We never saw him after that, did we?"

"All I remember is hearing him scream at Grandma and Aunt Lou about not going to the hospital," I replied. "If they tried to make him go, he would write them out of his will."

For a second I thought I could hear the old man bellowing from two bedrooms away as I lay terrified with my brother in our twin beds.

"They never took us to see him," I said, wondering if that was why I couldn't remember his face.

"Mother was furious they took him without telling her," Jerry said.

"Aunt Lou told me it was an awful place like a jail," Dottie said. "With bars and gates and a little room with a toilet on a chair that the attendants had to empty. After that she and Grandma never went to see him, either."

"And they wouldn't let Mother go, either," Jerry added.

"Whatever happened to old Tom?" I wondered.

"He must have wandered off somewhere," Dottie said looking away. "Some old woman came around looking for him, but Grandma told her to go home or she'd call the police."

"Were you there for the welder, Dottie?" Jerry asked. "Mother was driving Wally and me home from nursery school and nearly ran over this man with a huge mask who was kneeling beside the outside metal doors to the coal cellar. The sparks were great."

Sparks. I saw sparks. What was it I saw in the sparks in the coal cellar, when I was running around with the burning newspaper?

"Grandma and Anna boarded up the door to the coal cellar in the basement," Jerry said. "Remember that, Wally?"

"I must have missed all the fun," Dottie said, her childhood jealousy of her little brothers stroked back to life.

"I wanted to be a welder until I was twelve," Jerry said.

"What changed your mind?" Dottie asked in a tone suggesting he would have been better off spending his life in a welder's mask and asbestos gloves.

"Grandma died, and I learned about wills."

Jerry had gone to law school and on to become one of the best

estate attorneys in Cleveland, but he had never been able to find a way to break our Grandparents' wills. No one had ever broken one of his wills, either, but his failure with our Grandparents' wills left him unsatisfied. His wife had died several years earlier, and none of his children cared enough to come to Aunt Lou's funeral.

"Harris Scintilton should be along soon with Aunt Lou's will," he added, glancing at his watch.

"There won't be any surprises, Jerry," Dottie said, practicing her Aunt Lou smile.

There had not been any surprises since we learned about the power of appointment in Grandpa's will. Perhaps to insure that his daughters paid sufficient attention to his widow, perhaps to show he could still torment them from the grave, he had given Grandma the power to appoint the residue of his estate to our Mother or Aunt Lou. Predictably this intensified the rivalry between them, which they acted out by fawning upon the old lady and whispering poison about each other to her.

At first Mother had the advantage with us as the only grandchildren, but then Father returned from the Army and over Mother's shrieking objections moved us to Cleveland. Aunt Lou, pretending concern for Grandma's failing health, remained in the mansion, happily sacrificing whatever hope she may have had for a normal life to obtain sole possession of Grandpa's estate. Her success inspired Dottie to adopt the same tactic to cut Jerry and me out of Aunt Lou's will.

"Whatever happened to Anna after Grandma died?" Jerry asked to break the silence.

"Oh, she's still at the house," Dottie replied with as much interest as if he had asked about a vacuum cleaner.

"I can't believe she stayed on all these years," said Jerry. "Aunt Lou and Grandma were just savage to her."

"Where could a woman like that go? She was on parole when we got her," Dottie sneered. "She tried to leave once, but after Aunt Lou refused to give her a reference, she decided to stay."

"What had she done?" I wondered.

"She got caught selling marijuana," Dottie laughed. "For years Grandma had to give her bus money every month to go to the courthouse for a urine test."

The chime at the front door sounded softly, and we could hear Harris Scintilton and the funeral home director chuckling about the success of their joint referral network. Then the late-fifties lawyer entered, softly elegant with gray hair, thin rimmed glasses, an ingratiating smile, and the finest Brooks Brothers accoutrements. Dottie almost leapt upon him and pecked his cheek, as happy as a lottery winner reaching for the check. He only glanced at his former client lying painted and alone in her mahogany coffin.

"Would you like to spend a last minute or two with Louise?" Jerry asked sarcastically.

They didn't shake hands. Jerry detested the lawyer who presided over our disinheritance with all the loathing an estate lawyer could have for a rival.

"I spent enough time with her while she was alive," the other lawyer replied.

Scintilton set his briefcase on Dottie's chair, opened it and removed three copies of Aunt Lou's will. Without speaking he presented the first to Dottie, who glanced at it, gasped, and clasped it to her chest, as if she had been named Miss America. He handed the second and third copies to Jerry and to me.

"Is it what Aunt Lou told me to expect?" Dottie cried

excitedly, as if she had ever doubted.

"And more," the lawyer said, smiling as happily if the estate were going to him.

"Call if you have any questions," he said to Jerry and me.

"I'm sure it's very clear," replied Jerry, his raw voice betraying the rage building up inside him.

Without looking at it, he placed the will in his jacket pocket.

"I have a question for you, Dottie," I said. "I'd like to see the old house again. This may be my last time here."

Dottie and Harris looked at each other until the lawyer barely shrugged.

"Maybe after the internment tomorrow," Dottie said.

"I'd like to come, too," Jerry said.

"We can have lunch together at the house," Dottie offered, gaining confidence as the sole heir of the Gerholdt fortune. "I'm sure Anna will be glad to see you both one last time."

How odd to sit again in that dark-paneled dining room in summer with the window air conditioner straining to hold the temperature at 78°, while Anna served supermarket salmon salad, chef salad, ham salad, hot house tomatoes, and bake-in-the-box rolls. Elegant in a black dress accented by Aunt Lou's diamond brooch, Dottie presided from Grandpa's old chair. Lunch moved as slowly as our ninety-year-old server. Even Harris Scintilton appeared discouraged by a dessert of rainbow sherbet and stale Girl Scout cookies. If Aunt Lou had not left several bottles of Sancerre in the refrigerator, I doubt any of us would have survived.

Anna was as stoic as ever, showing remarkable *sangfroid* in the presence of the aging shells of the children who had once tormented her with the fear they would report something we did when she was supposed to be minding us to Grandma. During one of her many absences, Dottie announced in voice amplified by the wine that she was going to put her in a Medicaid nursing home when the house was sold.

"I think she's losing it, Harris," Dottie continued. "When I told her we wanted to see the basement, she said she was going to fix it up special just for us."

"What could she possibly do?" wondered the lawyer.

"I don't know," Dottie said.

With that prelude, we arose to use Grandma's lavender-scented lavatory seriatim before beginning our tour of our childhood past. As we left the dining room, I saw Anna's shadow recede into the kitchen. She had been listening to every word.

"Let's save the basement for last," Jerry said, starting up the stairs toward the marble bust of Beethoven on the landing. "I want to see our old room."

The staircase smelled of mildew, lavender, and gin. At the top we peered into the master bedroom still hung with Grandma's old curtains. It reeked of Aunt Lou's cologne, and the bed sheets were still tangled from her last agony.

"There were two bathrooms," Jerry remembered. "One for Grandpa and one for Grandma."

"Aunt Lou used them both," said Dottie.

The next bedroom was Aunt Lou's before Grandma died; the next was Mother's old bedroom that she shared with Dottie while our Father was away in the Army and Dottie had kept for herself ever since, and finally a guest bedroom where Jerry and I had slept. The blinds were down, the twin beds still covered with

Army blankets just as they had been when we slept there, and the room was dark. I wondered if anyone had been in it in fifty years.

Dottie pushed the button on the wall to light the flickering yellow lamp between our twin beds, and my dream started to return.

"Are you alright?" Jerry asked.

"Maybe we should go downstairs," Dottie suggested, leading us back into the hall and downstairs.

We walked silently through the kitchen to the basement door. The door was open.

Jerry and I went first. As we descended, I half-way expected to see stalactites hanging from the ceiling fed by the dripping green copper pipes. Two light bulbs dangling from the ceiling gave just enough light to make me feel I was entering a mine shaft about to collapse.

"At least Aunt Lou got rid of the washer with the ringer," Dottie remarked as she joined us, admiring a 1970s era washer and dryer.

Scintilton came down last, taking up his position at her elbow like a favored condottiere or gigolo.

"Anna? Are you down here?" Dottie called.

The boards Anna and Aunt Lou had nailed to the far wall had been ripped off, exposing the door to the coal cellar. We were starting forward carefully to avoid the splinters, when the door creaked open, and Anna called to us.

"Come in, Miss Dottie and Jerry and little Wally."

It was so dark inside that only her white uniform was visible.

"Anna!" Dottie exclaimed. "Why did you make this mess?"

Beside her white uniform was something with a round ivory top and two black holes accented by steel-rims. Anna pulled the light cord and the ancient bulb burst, spewing orange sparks over the skull beside her. I jumped backwards, nearly knocking Jerry down.

“Wally!” he cried. “What’s the matter?”

“The sparks!” I gasped, feeling my chest tighten.

I had run into the coal cellar with my burning newspaper to get away from Anna. Just before it flared out, I saw Grandpa wrapped up to his nose with clothesline, white eyes staring at me. I dropped the paper, and the orange sparks went black.

Dottie screamed. Scintilton and Jerry had their phones out and were shining the lights on a skeleton trussed up with rotten clothesline

“My God!” Jerry exclaimed.

Dottie grabbed the lawyer’s hand.

“Who is it?” she whispered

“Grandpa,” I said.

We were so intent on the ancient corpse that we did not notice Anna slipping around us until the basement door slammed shut and the lock clicked. I left the others staring at the tethered corpse and grabbed the handle. The door was locked.

Dottie and Jerry and Harris Scintilton joined me, frantic.

“Anna!” Dottie screamed. “Let us out!”

Dottie banged on the door with her fists, and I felt the horror Grandpa must have felt when he saw the coal cellar door close behind me.

“My God, we’ll all die in here!” Dottie sobbed.

Jerry and Harris Scintilton were working their phones, but Scintilton's phone did not connect. Neither did Jerry's. Neither did mine.

"The damn ceiling and walls are as thick as a fort," Harris snapped.

Or a tomb, I thought, and started to laugh.

"What's so damn funny?" shrieked Dottie.

"Anna's been waiting for this moment as long as you've been waiting for Aunt Lou to die and get Grandpa's estate," I said.

"Why?" she demanded.

"Remember how we threatened to tell on her to Grandma? And how you and Aunt Lou treated her like a slave all these years?"

"What makes you so sure the skeleton is your Grandfather, Walter?" Harris Scintilton demanded. "I thought he died in the sanitarium."

"I saw him here when I was playing with fire from the hot water heater."

I could see his face again, pink and jowly beneath ruffled white hair after they trussed him up. It might have been pleasant except for steel-rimmed spectacles that made him seem severe.

"Why did Anna kill him?" Scintilton asked, working his phone again.

"Anna didn't kill him. Grandma and Aunt Lou killed him to keep him from changing his will," Jerry answered.

None of our phones was working, and my chest was getting tighter.

"Anna, are you out there?" I called through the door. "Jerry

and I need out.”

We could hear her sobbing on the other side of the door.

“Anna, Jerry and I need to go pee pee,” I called to her, hoping she would revert to the times she had led us to Grandma’s lavender scented bathroom.

The sobbing stopped.

“You and Jerry are bad little boys,” she said through the door.

“How long ’til somebody finds us?” Dottie said starting to panic.

No one answered. Dottie began to cry. She had never been in a situation that a lawyer or a drink couldn’t solve.

Her lawyer kept working his phone, snorting every time he couldn’t get a signal. Jerry had given up. Dotti sat down on one of the old coal bins.

“They’ll find us soon,” Scintilton said to reassure Dottie.

But they didn’t. An hour, several hours, the whole afternoon passed, and nobody came. Dottie was sobbing uncontrollably. Jerry and Scintilton sat on the edges of old coal bins, while I stood at the door.

“Remember the time we hid from Anna?” I said to Jerry to cheer him up.

“Oh, stop!” he yelled finally snapping.

“We’re all going to die together!” Dottie shrieked.

“I’m through with this whole damned family and their damned wills!” Jerry screamed at Dottie and Harris Scintilton as if he were about to strangle them. Instead he turned and kicked savagely at the basement door, bursting the old boards apart.

I let Jerry and Dottie and Harris Scintilton go out ahead of me.

"You bitch!" Dottie screamed at Anna. "You'll pay for this!"

Anna was standing beside the door, sobbing and cringing like an animal about to be whipped.

"It's alright, Anna," I said, putting my arm around her. I could feel her shoulder bones through her worn uniform.

We followed the others upstairs. Anna went to the kitchen, and I went into the living room. Dottie was sitting on the couch beside Harris Scintilton, shuddering, while Jerry paced back and forth between piano and the French doors to the veranda.

"Call the police, Harris," Dottie raged against Anna. "With her record, she'll never get out of jail."

"Sometimes a little discretion is called for," her lawyer answered slowly. "The police would ask a lot of question about that skeleton in the coal cellar."

"We wouldn't have to tell them about the skeleton, would we?" Dottie asked hopefully.

"This won't change anything about the estate," the lawyer said to comfort her.

"It will change things quite a bit," interjected Jerry. "A murderer cannot inherit from the estate of her victim."

"What does that mean?" Dottie asked, her voice quavering.

"A murderer may not inherit from their victim," Jerry repeated, suddenly the winning lawyer again. "Grandma could not validly exercise the power to appoint her estate to Aunt Lou because she had murdered Grandpa, and Aunt Lou, the other murderer, could not pass the estate to you in her will. So the three of us will inherit it equally."

Scintilton sniffed in contempt.

"Don't worry, Dottie. No good defense lawyer will ever let Anna testify, and they'll never prove it."

"We can prove it when we disinter the body in Grandpa's niche in the mausoleum," Jerry said. "It's their other victim."

"What do you mean?" demanded Scintilton, for once without a rejoinder.

"It's old Tom, the handy man," Jerry explained. "They sent him to the asylum instead of Grandpa and stuck him in the mausoleum when he died. That's why no one ever missed Grandpa."

"Dottie will settle rather than have all this come out," I said, watching my sister wring her fingers around Aunt Lou's rings. "We'll let her keep Aunt Lou's jewelry, won't we, Jerry?"

"But not the house," Jerry countered. "It's for all of us."

"As long as she makes appropriate arrangements for Anna," I continued, turning to Dottie. "There're some very nice retirement centers in town now, Dottie. I'm sure you can find one that won't cost you more than \$100,000 a year."

"For Anna?" she cried. "She tried to kill us."

"She had pretty good reasons after all she went through from Grandma and Aunt Lou and you," I said. "We're going to have to downplay that if you want people to believe this is just a family tragedy that happened years ago."

When the police arrived, they found Anna in the kitchen finishing a bottle of gin and the Gerholdt heirs talking about how they had found the skeleton when they went to the basement for the first time since they were children.

“I suppose we’ll have to switch Tom out of the mausoleum and put Grandpa in his rightful place,” Jerry remarked as we walked up the stairs behind the officers.

“Just don’t expect me to come to his viewing,” I replied.

[Table of Contents](#)

Fred McGavran is a graduate of Kenyon College and Harvard Law School, and served as an officer in the US Navy. After retiring from law, he was ordained a deacon in the Diocese of Southern Ohio, where he serves as Assistant Chaplain with Episcopal Retirement Services. Black Lawrence Press published *The Butterfly Collector*, his award winning collection of short stories in 2009, and Glass Lyre Press published *Recycled Glass and Other Stories*, his second collection, in April 2017. For more information, please go to www.fredmcgavran.com.

Follow NER on Twitter [@NERIconoclast](https://twitter.com/NERIconoclast)